

Hamsa Hamsa* by Gail Loon Lustig

This evening I listened to David Broza's interview with Allison Kaplan Sommer on the Ha'aretz podcast <https://omny.fm/shows/haaretz-weekly/broza-v2> which I was forwarded by a friend in England who had just listened to it and felt inspired by his optimistic words during these conflicting times.

I have always liked David Broza, his warm and sincere personality, his giving and caring nature of connecting to those in need, through his music - consistently relating to the complex situation in Israel with hope. I guess there was the added fact that his upbringing had been different, having lived in Spain and England as a child. He wasn't a through and through Sabra. He seemed to have a more relaxed and ideological view of Israel than many other locals, which I identified with.

The story I'd like to tell about Broza which involves him indirectly, took place in 1994. I was living in the South African Federation building on the border of Givatayim and Tel Aviv, a ten story building in the shape of a wedding cake with the larger apartments of five rooms down below and then decreasing in size the higher one went, until right at the top, there were small studio flats.

The 'building' as we called it, was occupied by new immigrants from Southern Africa. It had been designed by a South African architect and erected in the early 1980's, was spacious and full of light with French doors opening onto spacious balconies. It rapidly became a treasure for young families who chose to live in the centre of the country and who could rent their apartment for lengthy periods.

Opposite the building was the spacious lawn with its mulberry trees, bordered by the well-known hostel for single South African residents who needed comfortable accommodation while settling into their new home. The residents of both buildings had set up a small makeshift synagogue in the hall, with a curtain separating men from women, a torah which had made its way from a community in South Africa, kept safely in the Ark - all tended by a few volunteers who helped organize the services on Friday and holidays in the fashion they had left behind. Simple, yet meaningful.

We all knew one another. There was certainly a communal feel about the place, the children were friends, their parents supporting one another in so many ways from borrowing and lending to being there for one another whenever necessary. We became lifelong friends.

And so, here's the story I promised.

Wednesday, Oct 19th, 1994 was a regular weekday. The atmosphere in Israel was tense, with the Israeli Jordan Treaty of Peace to be signed one week later. And then, the devastating News at 9.00 am when a 20 kg TNT bomb exploded on a packed No. 5 Dan bus going north on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv. Not only did it shatter several buildings in the street, but killed 25 passengers, injuring tens more. The front of the bus carried the chief damage where the Hamas suicide -terrorist bomber had laid the explosive in a bag at his feet, counting the seconds to set it off.

The news of the attack travelled at lightning speed around the city. I was not far from home at work in the Maccabi Clinic, receiving patients when the phone rang in my room.

'Gail, by now you must have heard about the terrorist bus attack?' my neighbour Freda was on the phone.

'We are so worried because Sivan was on the bus and we're not yet sure what happened to her!'

'Oh, God, no!! I shouted back.

Sivan was a young girl who lived with her parents and two brothers on the third floor. We all loved her sweet and gentle nature and special personality.

The session at work took ages to pass. I could barely concentrate.

When I arrived home it became clear that Sivan had been on the bus on her way to school, but miracle of miracles, she was OK and would be brought home later after being checked out at the local hospital.

The afternoon wore on, we were glued to our TVs when from down below the cheers of excited neighbours broke the anxious atmosphere.

Sivan was on her father's shoulder, barefoot, her hair covering her face. She was pale but still managed a smile to those around her. We were all amazed and grateful that she had survived,

Apparently she had got on the bus holding a small *hamsa***, that had recently been given to her as a gift by David Broza, her father's good friend.

Just as the bus jerked and left the stop, the *hamsa* fell from Sivan's hand and rolled down the floor between the seats to the back of the bus which was packed. Sivan went after it, managed to pick it up, and then stood holding the plastic hanging strap from the rail, the *hamsa* firmly in her hand! Just then, a massive explosion filled the air. Sivan escaped harm!

That evening we opened the little hall for the family. They were not religious, but wanted to say a prayer of thanks that their beloved Sivan had come home safely. And so indeed, we all piled into our modest *shul*, while Sivan's father recited the Prayer of Thanksgiving that his special daughter had been saved.

And yes, today, I cannot listen to David Broza's song '*yiheye tov*' - 'things will be better' without recalling the miracle that had touched us all.

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\*"Hamsa hamsa" is a traditional Middle Eastern and North African phrase used to ward off the "evil eye" and invite good luck, derived from the Arabic and Hebrew word for five.

\*\* The *hamsa* is a talisman which is meant to protect its owner and prevent the 'evil eye' from causing harm.

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**Written in 2026 by Gail Loon Lustig**

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